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TAGS: SNAR PREL PGOV VE

SUBJECT: BRV "REJECTS" USG DESIGNATION OF BRV AS MAJOR DRUG TRANSIT COUNTRY

REF: CARACAS 1225

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR FRANCISCO FERNANDEZ
REASON 1.4 (D)

¶1. (C) Summary: Senior Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (BRV) officials publicly "rejected" the USG designation of the BRV as one of the countries that failed to carry out its international counternarcotics obligations. Minister of Justice and Interior Tarek al Aissami and National Anti-Drug Agency (ONA) Director Nestor Reverol both appeared on national television September 17 to criticize the move. BRV officials, presumably expecting the designation for the fourth consecutive year, began defending the BRV's counterdrug track record in earnest over the last few weeks. Highly sensitive to criticism of its counter-drug record, the BRV continues to attack the messenger, rather than the message. The BRV shows no sign of renewing any aspects of bilateral counternarcotics cooperation that it discontinued starting in 2005. End Summary.

A CONCERTED PR CAMPAIGN

¶12. (C) The BRV has made a concerted public relations effort over the last several weeks to prove it is making progress in fighting narcotrafficking. On August 31, during his weekly "Alo, Presidente" talk show, Venezuelan President Chavez showed a series of charts, allegedly based on international sources, that he claimed proved Venezuela was among the top five most active countries in counternarcotics seizures since ¶2006. Later in the show, he called ONDCP Director Walters a "stupid gringo" after Walters faulted BRV counterdrug efforts. On September 1 during a press conference, BRV Vice President Carrizalez said Venezuela was a victim of bad geography, being placed between a large producer (Colombia) and a big consumer (the United States). Carrizalez claimed Venezuela had interdicted large quantities of drugs from Colombia. He then accused the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) of being part of an international drug cartel (Reftel).

¶13. (C) During a September 11 press conference, ONA Director Reverol said that the United States would maintain an "ambiguous" position on Venezuela's counternarcotics efforts. Reverol said the USG would criticize Venezuela's cooperation, but would not "decertify" the BRV because doing so would mean the "U.S. Senate would have to suspend economic aid to opposition non-governmental organizations." Any criticism of the BRV, he said, would be limited to Venezuela's lack of cooperation. Reverol appears to have been referring to President Bush's decision in the past to

waive certain foreign assistance prohibitions for reasons of national interest. (Comment: It is unclear whether Reverol was purposefully obfuscating in order to downplay the importance of the decision, or whether he simply did not understand the national interest waiver of penalties. End Comment).

BRV REACTION

¶4. (C) During their televised September 17 press conference, both Aissami and Reverol assailed the characterization of Venezuela as having "failed demonstrably." Reverol called the decision, "unilateral, coercive, and arbitrary." Reverol said USG wanted to, "coerce Venezuela to make it subordinate in the exercise of its sovereign rights," and that the "Yankee government...clearly violates international legal arrangements." Aissami followed up saying, "we reject the immoral accusations made yesterday by the government of the United States." The new Minister of Justice and Interior also said the BRV, "does not expect less from a government that has failed before the whole world."

COMMENT

¶5. (C) The BRV remains highly sensitive to criticism of its counternarcotics efforts. BRV officials, however, continue to respond to such criticisms by attacking the messenger, not the substance of the message. BRV sensitivity may stem from unease about the prospects of Chavista candidates in state and local elections to be held in November, although most Venezuelans do not appear to connect Venezuela's soaring

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crime problem with illicit drugs transiting the country. Unlike the OFAC designation of three BRV officials, the BRV did not try to spin the designation of Venezuela for the fourth consecutive year as a retaliatory measure by the USG to President Chavez's September 11 expulsion of the Ambassador. The BRV will almost certainly continue to eschew any counternarcotics cooperation with the USG, just as it has done in large part since 2005.

CAULFIELD